

# Marching to a Different Drummer and School Problems

**Question:** My son often gets answers wrong in school because he seems to be marching to a different drummer. He has a creative way of looking at things, especially things that are not yes or no questions. When I talk with him about what he is thinking, his answers are often deep, but this way of thinking is not helping him in school. How can I help him succeed in school without harming his creativity?

Everyone learns in a different way and at a different pace. This can be hard to remember when traditional schooling can expect one right answer from all of the children in a class, especially in subjects like math and science. Your child's creative thinking can be an advantage or a difficulty, depending on the situation. By promoting the life skill of Making Connections, you can help your child make the connections in learning that he needs to do better in school while still supporting the unique connections he makes.

**Making Connections** is at the heart of learning—figuring out what's the same and what's different, and sorting these things into categories. Making unusual connections is at the core of creativity. In a world where people can Google for information, it is the people who can see connections who are able to go beyond knowing information to using this information well.

1

## Support your child's unique thought process.

Professor of learning research at MIT Mitch Resnick thinks that the ability to make unusual connections—to think creatively—is central not just to children's success, but also to our society's success. He says:

*It's not just about access to information, but our ability to build on knowledge based on the information we have access to. As I look ahead, I think the key to success in the future (and the key to satisfaction in the future) is not just going to be how much we know or what we know. I think that the ability to think and act creatively will be the key distinguishing quality that will allow people to succeed and be satisfied in their lives.*

The typical school setting often expects one right answer, and your child's creative way of looking at things—especially things that are not yes or no questions—can be frustrating in these situations. Let your child know that his way of thinking is unique, valuable and something that you want him to keep.

- Explain to your child that there are some answers that his teacher is looking for, and that you will work together to learn the "school way" for finding those answers.
- Encourage him to go to the library or look online for biographies of famous thinkers like Albert Einstein who challenged traditional ways of thinking.

As you walk your son through the "school way" of solving a problem, make sure he knows

that you are helping him become “a bilingual learner” of sorts—to learn the school way while retaining his creative approach. When YOU have this mindset— that you are helping your son be a “bilingual learner” of sorts—it helps you handle the situations that arise more positively.

2

## Ask your child to explain his thinking.

Bethany Rittle-Johnson of Vanderbilt University and her colleagues conducted a study to investigate whether explaining what you've learned to someone else can improve your use of that knowledge in a new situation. Rittle-Johnson and her colleagues found that children did better in solving problems when they had to explain their thinking process to their mothers. (Mothers were the subjects of the studies, but it could have been fathers or other important people as well.) The children who explained their thinking did better than those who did not explain their thinking at all. The researchers concluded that having a listener matters:

*The general lesson might be that if you are having difficulty in understanding something, you should try explaining it to your mom.*

Rittle-Johnson's research indicates that having an audience motivates children. It seems to help them focus on the meaning behind what they are learning so they can put that knowledge into words and then use it.

- **Ask your child if he can explain how he came up with an incorrect answer.** Does it seem like he doesn't understand the question? Is he coming at the problem in an unexpected way? This will help you understand your child's thought process while encouraging him to reflect on how he makes connections.
- **Give him feedback on his and the “school way” of thinking.** You can say something like: “You really thought about that question in an interesting way. Let's think about how your teacher or another classmate could come up with a different answer.”

3

## Recognize that making mistakes is a part of learning.

Some of your child's mistakes have to do with the process of learning, while other mistakes might have to do with his development. Liz Spelke of Harvard University notes that children can have a difficult time seeing certain kinds of connections. Children develop at their own pace and Spelke encourages parents to remember that sometimes mistakes are just part of children's development.

It is important for children to know that making mistakes is not only okay, it is also necessary for learning. It often takes trial and error to get something right. Support your child to keep trying, even when he doesn't get the answer right the first time.

- **Recognize how hard your child is working.** Carol Dweck of Stanford University has found that when parents praise their children's efforts and strategies—instead of their intelligence

or talent—children see their abilities as something they can improve. Be specific and supportive with your praise: "That math problem is confusing, but you are really working at it."

- **Share your own mistakes and how you learned from them.** You can say something like: "I remember a time in school where I failed a test because I didn't read the directions clearly. I was upset, but it motivated me to read the directions carefully before I answered a question."
- **Encourage your child to ask questions if he needs an explanation.** Asking questions is not a sign of weakness; it is a strength. It shows your child knows when he needs help and that he is taking an active part in his own learning.

## 4

## Brainstorm with your child for ideas on how to help him make connections in ways that are effective in school.

Address the dilemma with your child directly: "You have such an interesting way of looking at things, but sometimes that doesn't seem to work at school. What ideas do you have to help you be more successful at school?"

- Help your child figure out which subjects are difficult for him and talk about why. What frustrates him? What come easily? Where and how can he use his ability to make unusual connections in his schoolwork? What subjects expect one kind of answer?
- Brainstorm possible ways to address this with him. For example, does he think he would benefit from a study group with children his own age or a one-on-one tutor? Your child is more likely to follow through with a plan when he feels involved in the problem-solving process.
- If you feel like your child is really struggling in school, talk to his teacher. Explain that you value his creative way of thinking, but also understand that he needs to learn the "school way," too. Come up with ideas together to support your son at school and at home.
- If you expect that there is a learning problem that goes deeper than just his creative thinking, go to a professional who can figure out what the problem is and develop strategies for addressing it.

In 2008, the Dana Foundation organized a group to investigate learning, arts and the brain. Michael Gazzaniga of the University of California at Santa Barbara describes their findings:

*There is growing evidence that learning of the arts—whether it be music, dance, drama, painting—has a positive impact on cognitive life.*

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5

## Make sure your child has lots of chances to express his creativity.

Art experiences are perfect opportunities for your child to explore all kinds of ideas and different ways of thinking without needing to come up with the "right" answer. Through creative expression, your child has the freedom to explore his thoughts.

- Does your child like to take in information visually, like through maps or pictures? Encourage your child to explore the visual arts like drawing, painting or photography. Is he more of a hands-on type of learner? He can try playing a musical instrument or working with clay.

6

## Play games that encourage your child to make connections, in both expected and unexpected ways.

Karen Wynn of Yale University finds that parents promote learning on the deepest level when they tap into children's passion and enthusiasm and build on it. Provide your child with fun and playful opportunities to make familiar and unfamiliar connections.

- Card games like "Go Fish," "War," "Old Maid" and "UNO" are all great games that ask your child to use his ability to sort and categorize according to color, number and symbol. Switch up the rules and do the opposite, or ask your child to come up with new ways of playing to encourage his creativity and flexible thinking.
- Optical illusions provide your child with practice in making new connections and understanding different ways of thinking. Visit the website: <http://kids.niehs.nih.gov/illusion/illusions.htm> for some fun ideas.